



Insights From the Student Experience, Part I

# EMOTIONAL & MENTAL HEALTH

Listening to youth is essential to effectively addressing the youth mental health crisis that is setting off alarms across America. This report provides insights into students' perceptions of happiness, suicide, bullying, counseling programs, and why - or why not - students are able to access help at school. The data come from 222,837 students at 845 schools across 20 states, and their responses are a resounding confirmation that mental health is a prevalent concern among youth themselves. And student responses show that we should all be concerned about the intersection of mental health and equity as some groups of students are especially in need of informed action. Youth express a collective desire – they even demand – that adults involve them in creating a more responsive education system so that they can, as one student put it, “find our way back to loving learning.”

# 10 KEY INSIGHTS

Emotional & Mental Health | Fall 2022

## Section one

### OBSTACLES TO LEARNING

- 1 “Depression, stress, and anxiety” is the most prevalent obstacle to learning for secondary students at every grade level, six through twelve.
- 2 The overall percentage of secondary students who identify “getting picked on or bullied” as an obstacle to learning drops from grades six through twelve; however, LGBTQ+ middle and high school students report at double the percentage of their peers that bullying is an impediment to learning.

## Section two

### THE HAPPINESS GAP

- 3 The percentage of children and youth who feel happy about their lives declines from grades three through twelve.
- 4 At every grade level there is a gender happiness gap as a larger percentage of boys report feeling happy about their lives than their classmates who identify as female or non-binary.

## Section three

### GETTING HELP

- 5 Just over one in five middle and high school students report that they have accessed a school counselor, a therapist, or a psychologist when they are feeling upset, stressed, or having a problem.
- 6 Fewer than half of middle school students and just over a third of high school students agree that their school has services or programs that help them when they are upset, stressed, or having problems.

## Section four

### TALKING TO SOMEONE

- 7 The percentage of elementary students who report that they have an adult they can talk to at school when they are upset drops steadily from third grade (61 percent) to fourth grade (55 percent) to fifth grade (50 percent).
- 8 Fewer than half of secondary students, regardless of grade level, gender, race, or LGBTQ+ status, report that they have an adult at school they can talk to when they feel upset, stressed, or have a problem.

## Section five

### SUICIDE

- 9 Overall 13 percent of middle school students and 14 percent of high school students report that they have considered suicide in the last year.
- 10 There is no significant difference in the percentage of youth reporting that they have considered suicide in the previous year by grade level or by race; however, there are alarming differences by gender identity and LGBTQ+ status.



Students grades six through twelve were asked:

Do any of the following make it hard to do your best in school?

- Feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious
- Distractions at home and family responsibilities
- My health or the health of my family members
- Getting picked on or bullied
- Changing from elementary to middle school
- My personal relationships
- Limited or no internet access
- Not having an adult to help me with my schoolwork
- Extracurricular commitments
- Not feeling safe at home

For students in grades six through twelve, depression, stress, and anxiety are the most frequently cited obstacles to learning. At the high school level, over 50 percent of students at every grade level cited depression, stress, and anxiety as an obstacle to learning, making it ubiquitous in the culture of American teenagers.

Five Most Cited Obstacles to Learning

MIDDLE SCHOOL

HIGH SCHOOL

#1	Feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious	50%	Feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious	56%
#2	Distractions at home and family responsibilities	35%	Distractions at home and family responsibilities	37%
#3	My health or the health of my family members	34%	My health or the health of my family members	31%
#4	My personal relationships	23%	Extracurricular commitments	28%
#5	Limited or no internet access	22%	My personal relationships	23%

Obstacles to Learning, Top Five List Outliers

Sixth and twelfth graders' top five lists vary slightly - but notably - from the overall lists above. Over a quarter of our youngest secondary students identify bullying as a top five obstacle to learning, while an even larger portion of seniors identify their jobs as an impediment to a healthy life-and-learning balance.

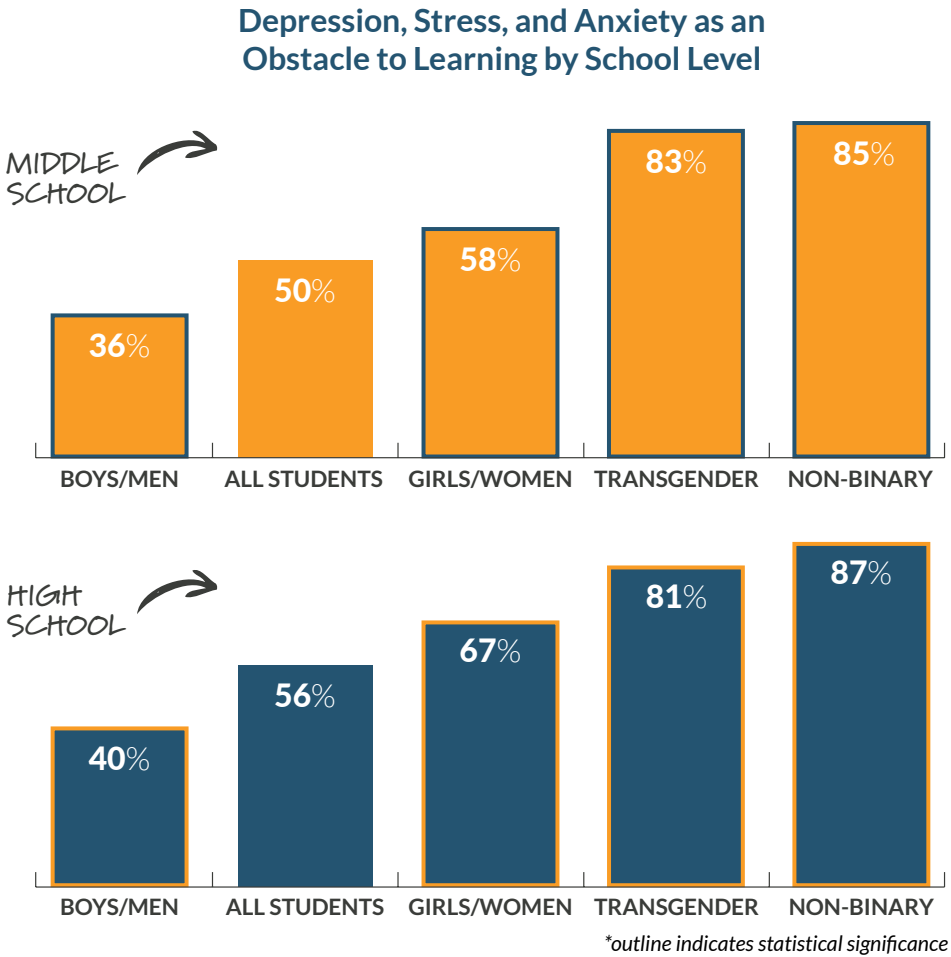
SIXTH GRADERS



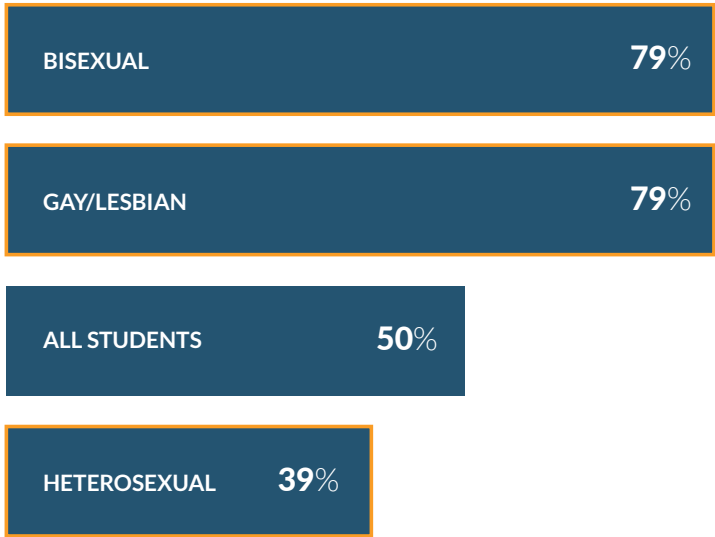
TWELFTH GRADERS



When it comes to depression, stress, and anxiety, gender identity matters. At both the middle- and high-school levels, reports of depression, stress, and anxiety as an obstacle to learning follow the same pattern. Boys report depression, stress, and anxiety at significantly lower percentages than their classmates, followed by girls, and peaking with concerning reporting percentages for transgender and non-binary youth.



### Depression, Stress, and Anxiety as an Obstacle to Learning by Sexual Orientation

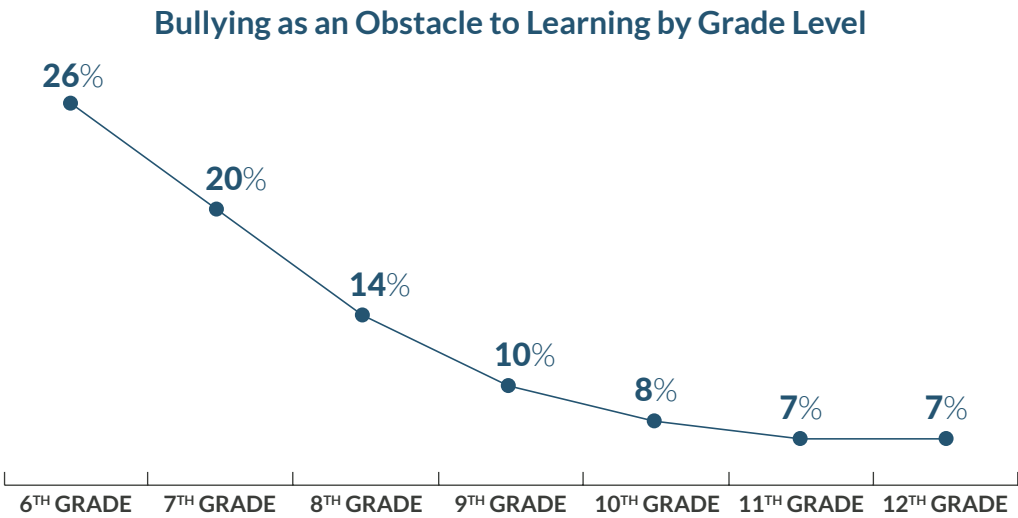


MIDDLE SCHOOL

Sexual orientation also matters when considering obstacles to learning, particularly for middle school students.

At the middle-school level, gay or lesbian students (79 percent) and bisexual students (79 percent) report at more than double the percentage of their heterosexual classmates (39 percent) that depression, stress, and anxiety impedes their learning.

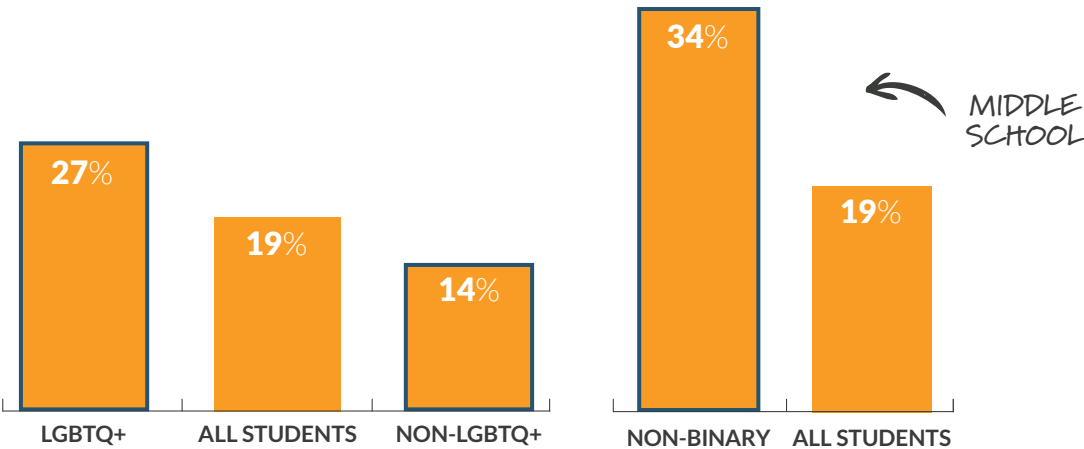
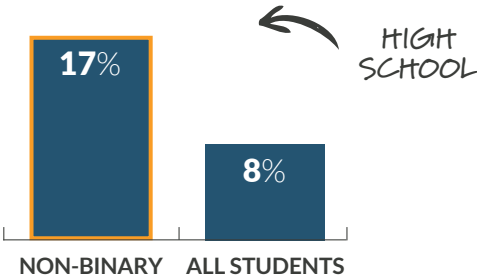
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The overall percentage of secondary students who identify “getting picked on or bullied” as an obstacle to their learning drops as students mature from sixth through twelfth grade; however, for gender non-binary and LGBTQ+ youth, bullying is a formidable weight that adds to their overall obstacle-to-learning load.

The only high school group to report at a significantly larger percentage than the overall (8 percent) that bullying is an obstacle to learning are non-binary students (17 percent). And at the middle-school level the only two groups to report that bullying is an obstacle to learning at a significantly higher rate than the overall (19 percent) are LGBTQ+ students (27 percent) and non-binary students (34 percent).

Bullying as Obstacle to Learning for Non-Binary and LGBTQ+ Students



\*outline indicates statistical significance



Students grades three through twelve were asked:

**Overall, how do you feel about your life?**

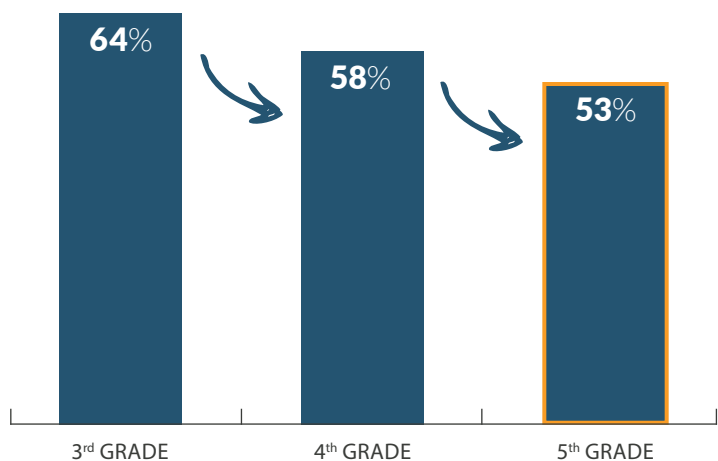
(Elementary students answered on a three-point scale, secondary students on a five-point scale)



Elementary students experience a happiness drop as they move up the elementary grades, from third grade (64 percent) to fourth grade (58 percent) to fifth grade (53 percent). By fifth grade the percentage of students who report that they are happy is significantly less than their peers in third and fourth grade.

Elementary students also evidence a gender happiness gap at every grade level surveyed – a gap that persists *and widens* through high school. Elementary boys agree at a significantly higher percentage (63 percent) that they are happy overall compared to their classmates who are girls (57 percent).

### Happiness in Elementary School by Grade and Gender



\*outline indicates statistical significance

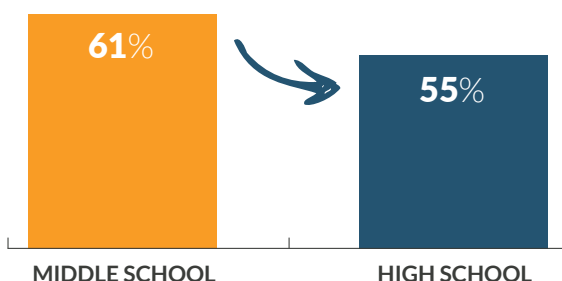
#### ELEMENTARY GIRLS



#### ELEMENTARY BOYS



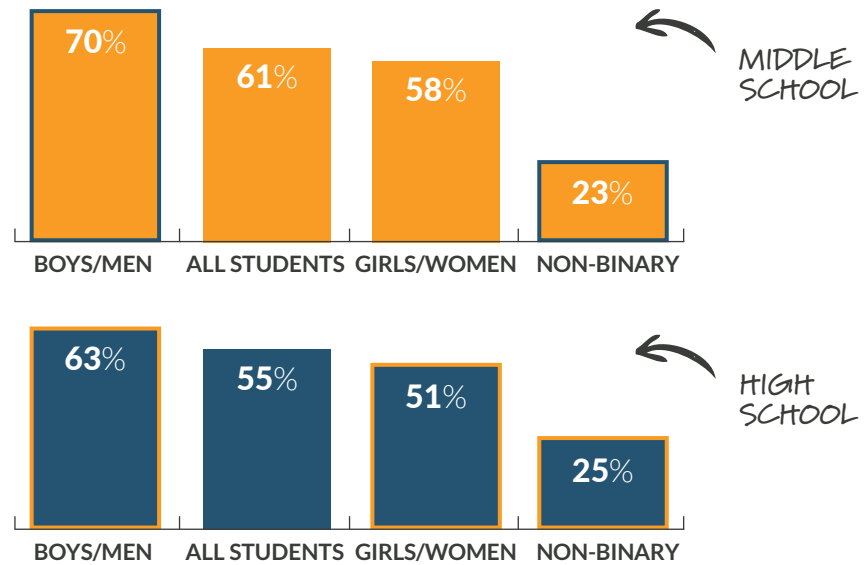
### Happiness by School Level



The percentage of secondary students who feel overall happy about their lives also drops as students move through middle school and into high school, where on average a little over half – 55 percent of students – feel overall happy about their lives.

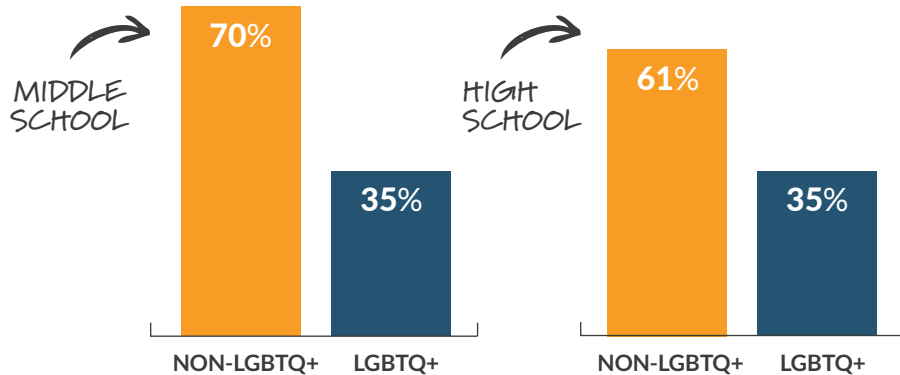
### Happiness by Gender Identity

Starting in middle school we also see a happiness gap for non-binary and LGBTQ+ students. For non-binary middle school students the happiness gap is particularly concerning as it grows into a happiness chasm with a full 47 percent difference between non-binary students (23 percent) and their happiest group of peers, boys (70 percent). And, this pattern holds in high school.



\*outline indicates statistical significance

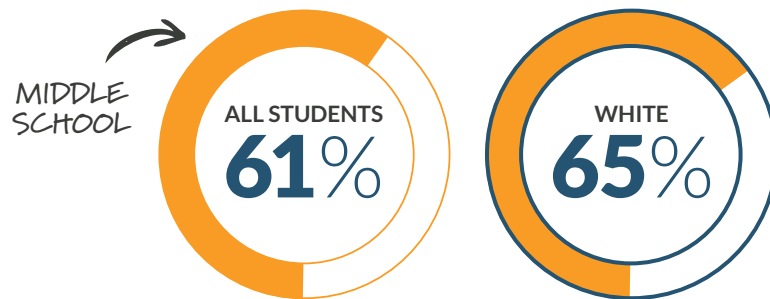
### Happiness by LGBTQ+ Status



There is also a striking happiness gap between middle- and high-school students who do not identify as LGBTQ+ and their LGBTQ+ classmates. While 35 percent of both LGBTQ+ middle and high school students report being overall happy with their lives, 70 and 61 percent respectively of their non-LGBTQ+ classmates report that they feel overall happy about their lives.

### Happiness by Race

Interestingly, across all three school levels, when responses are disaggregated by race/ethnicity, only White middle school students report at a significantly higher percentage than their peers being overall happy about their lives.



\*outline indicates statistical significance



Students grades six through twelve were asked two questions about getting help:

When I'm feeling upset, stressed, or having problems my school has programs or services that can help me.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

In the last twelve months, have you talked to a school counselor, a therapist, or a psychologist because you were upset, stressed, or having problems? (yes/no)

Secondary Students Seeking Mental Health Services

MIDDLE SCHOOL



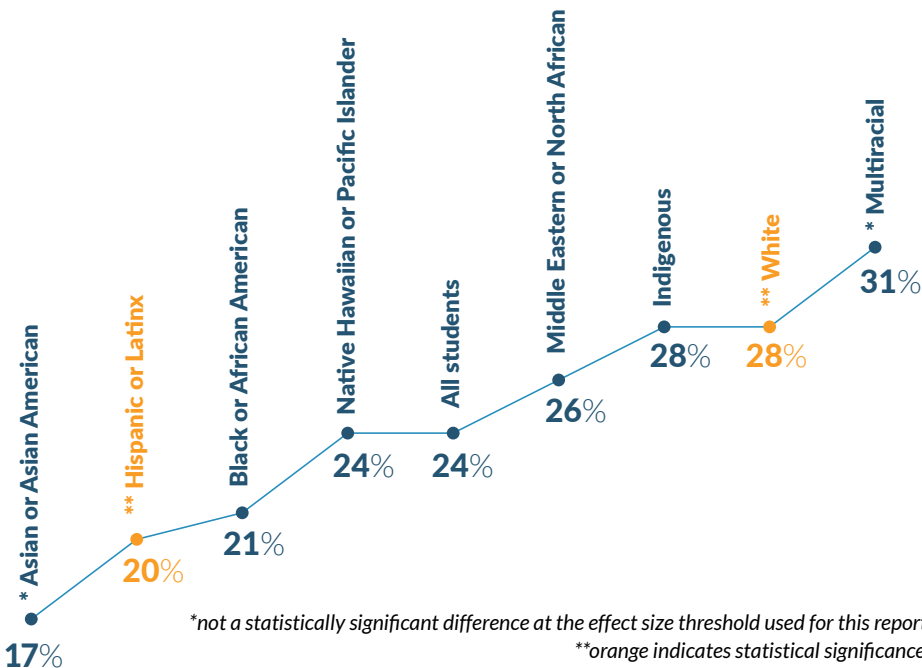
HIGH SCHOOL



Less than a quarter of secondary students (22 percent of middle school students and 24 percent of high school students) report accessing counseling or psychological services when they are feeling upset, stressed or having a problem.

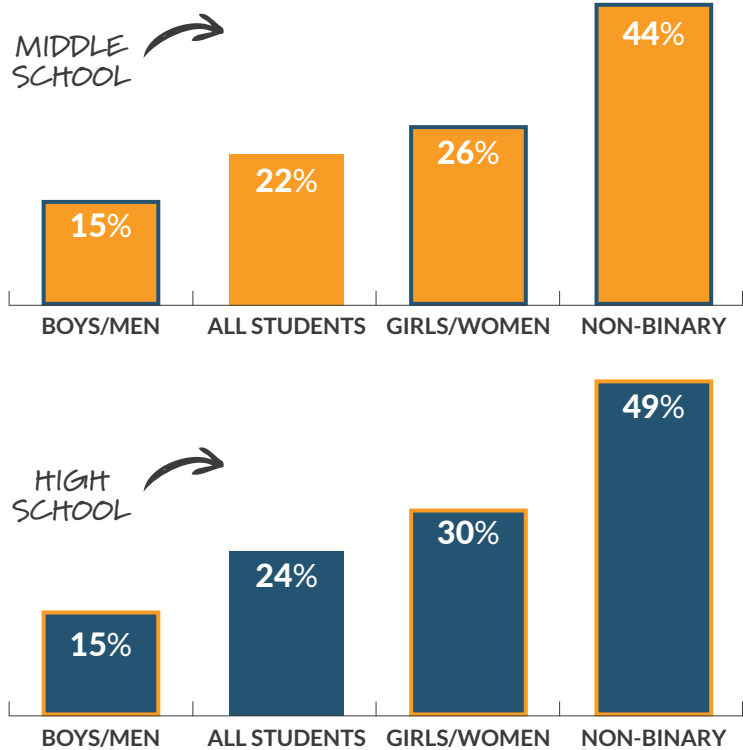
High School Students Who Spoke to a School Counselor, Therapist, or Psychologist by Race

When disaggregated by race, White students (28 percent) report at a significantly higher percentage than students overall (24 percent) that they have spoken with a school counselor, a therapist, or a psychologist in the last year. And Hispanic/Latinx students report at a significantly lower percentage (20 percent) than students overall (24 percent) that they have spoken with a school counselor, a therapist, or a psychologist in the last year.



Gender identity, LGBTQ+ status, and sexual orientation paint a complicated picture of which students access counseling or psychological services when they are feeling upset, stressed or having a problem.

Students Who Spoke to a School Counselor, Therapist, or Psychologist by Gender



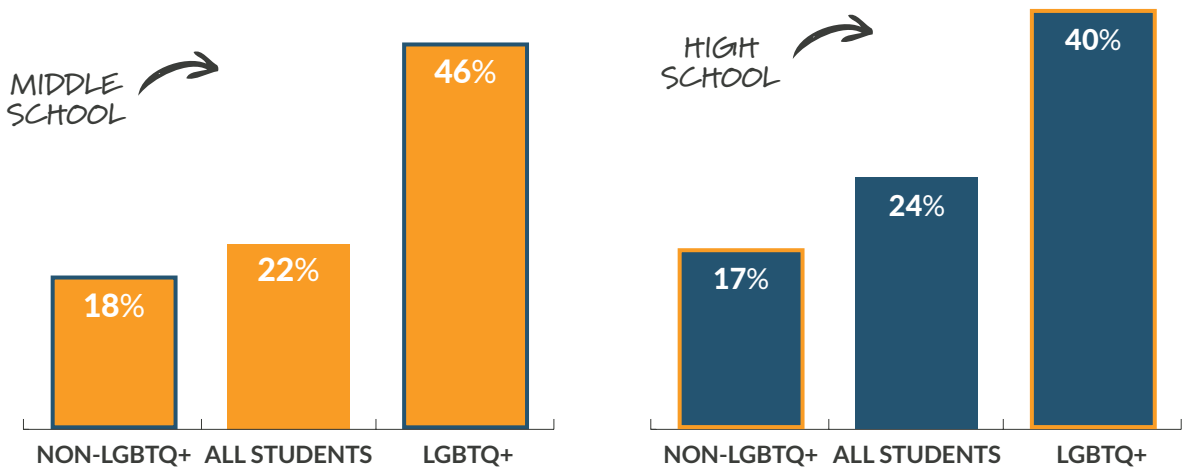
The percentage of middle school boys (15 percent) who report that they have spoken to a school counselor, a therapist, or a psychologist in the previous 12 months is significantly lower than girls (26 percent) and non-binary students (44 percent).

While the percentage of girls (30 percent) and non-binary students (49 percent) who report accessing counseling or therapy when under duress increases for high school students, it remains unchanged and significantly lower for high school boys (15 percent).

\*outline indicates statistical significance

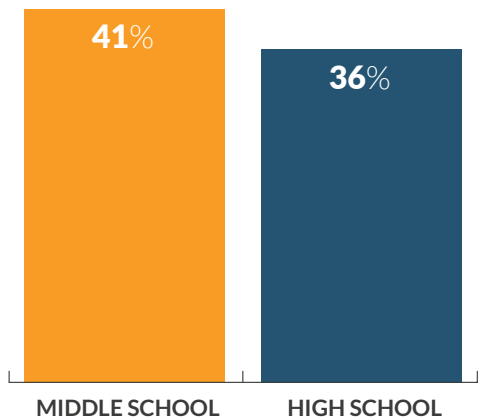
LGBTQ+ students at both the middle (40 percent) and high-school level (46 percent) are significantly more likely than their non-LGBTQ+ peers (17 percent at middle school, 19 percent at high school) to report accessing counseling when they are feeling upset, stressed or having a problem.

Students Who Spoke to a School Counselor, Therapist, or Psychologist by LGBTQ+ Status



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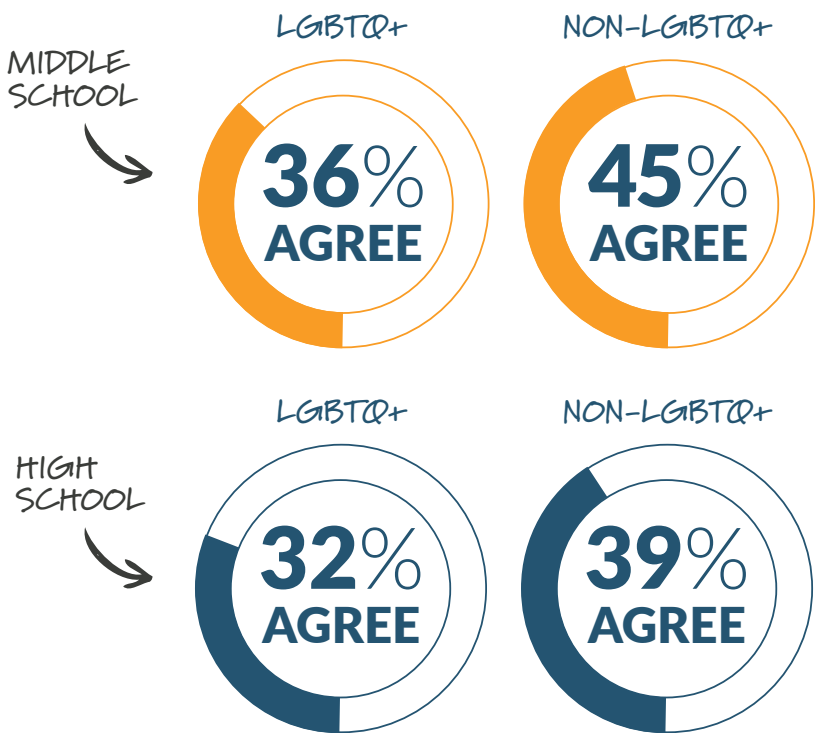
Satisfaction with School Mental Health Services, by School Level



Students generally give low marks to school services or programs intended to help them when they are upset, stressed or having problems. Less than half of middle school students agree that their school has such services (41 percent) and the percentage drops for high school students (36 percent).

While both middle and high school LGBTQ+ students report at higher percentages that they have spoken to a counselor in the last year, it is non-LGBTQ+ students at both levels who are significantly more satisfied with their schools’ services and programs. However, regardless of LGBTQ+ status, gender, or race, there is no demographic group of secondary students who agree at over 50 percent that their school’s services and programs meet their mental health needs.

Satisfaction with School Mental Health Services, by LGBTQ+ Status



# What do students want from schools to support their emotional and mental health?



**Students expressed strong opinions about their schools' mental health programs, and they offer specific critiques and pointed advice for improvements.**

## **Students want more outreach about services and easier access to mental health care professionals.**

“There are not enough counselors and mental health services. We have 1,000 kids and only 2 counselors.”

— 7th grade, White, prefer to self-describe

“Students are left in a spot where they need to acknowledge that they NEED help in order to seek out help, while students who are able to push these issues under the surface miss out on the help they need.”

— 12th grade, White, boy/man

“They could make more of an effort to reach out to students, make it more accessible and clear on what they can do for students, because sometimes it’s hard for students to reach out on their own.”

— 10th grade, African American, prefer not to say gender

“Not everyone has the privilege of going to seek professional help with mental illnesses or tough times, so knowing that you have a free, confidential aid to help you through it would be beneficial for so many people.”

— 8th grade, White, girl/woman

## **Students want access to trained mental health professionals.**

“We need an ACTUAL school therapist. ... The support for kids with disabilities and mental health issues is almost nonexistent unless you have a 504 or something like that.”

— 10th grade, White, prefer not to say gender

## **Students want to give input on mental health programs.**

“ASK FOR STUDENT INPUT. The fact that we don’t even get a say in what we want to discuss ... is frustrating.”

— 12th grade, Asian or Asian American, girl/woman

## **Students also want to be educated on how to be helpful to their peers.**

“I wish the school did more to train and educate its students on how to identify ... warning signs of deteriorating mental health, abuse, self-harm, and violence within their peers - and respond appropriately and compassionately.”

— 12th grade, Asian or Asian American, boy/man



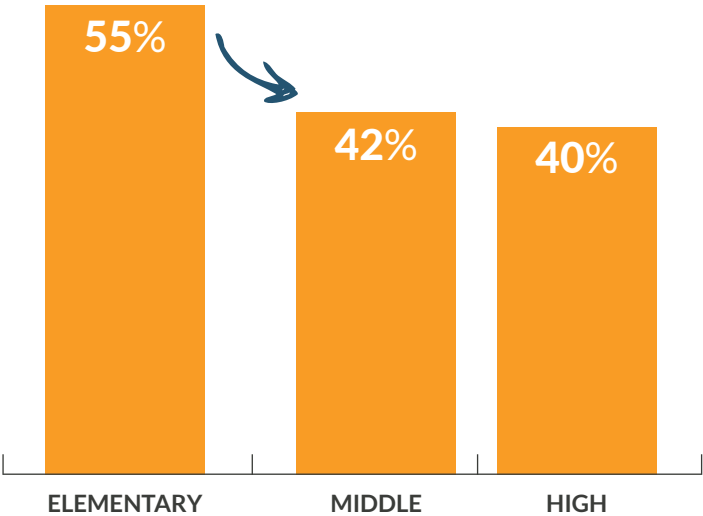
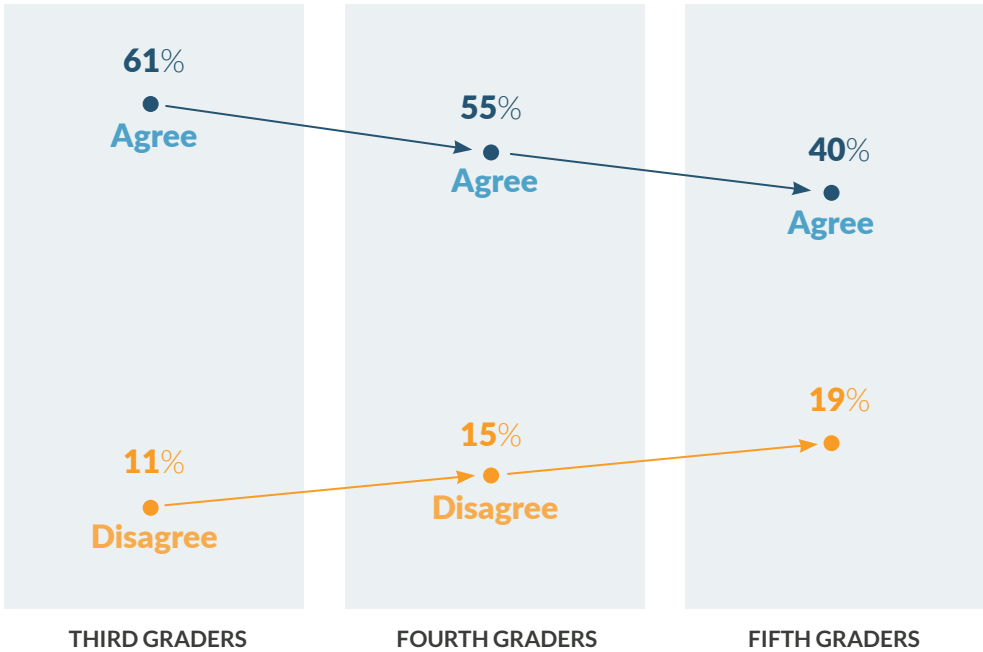
Students grades three through twelve were asked:

**When I'm feeling upset, stressed, or having problems, there is an adult from school who I can talk to about it.**  
(Elementary students answered on a three-point scale, secondary students on a five-point scale)

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Someone to Talk to, by Elementary Grade Level

The percentage of elementary students who report that they have an adult they can talk to when they are upset drops from grades three to five at the same time as the percentage who disagree grows.



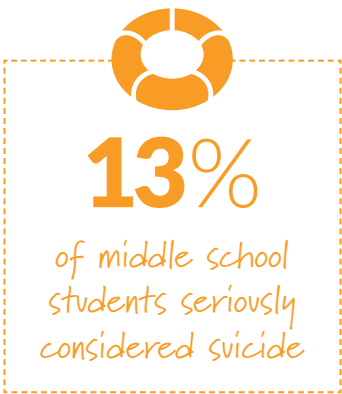
And regardless of gender, race, or LGBTQ+ status, there is no demographic group of *secondary* students who agree at over 50 percent that they have an adult at school they can talk to when they feel upset, stressed, or have a problem. Only 42 percent of middle school students and 40 percent of high school students indicate that there is an adult at school they can talk to when they feel upset, stressed, or have a problem.



Students grades six through twelve were asked:  
**In the last twelve months, have you seriously considered attempting suicide?**

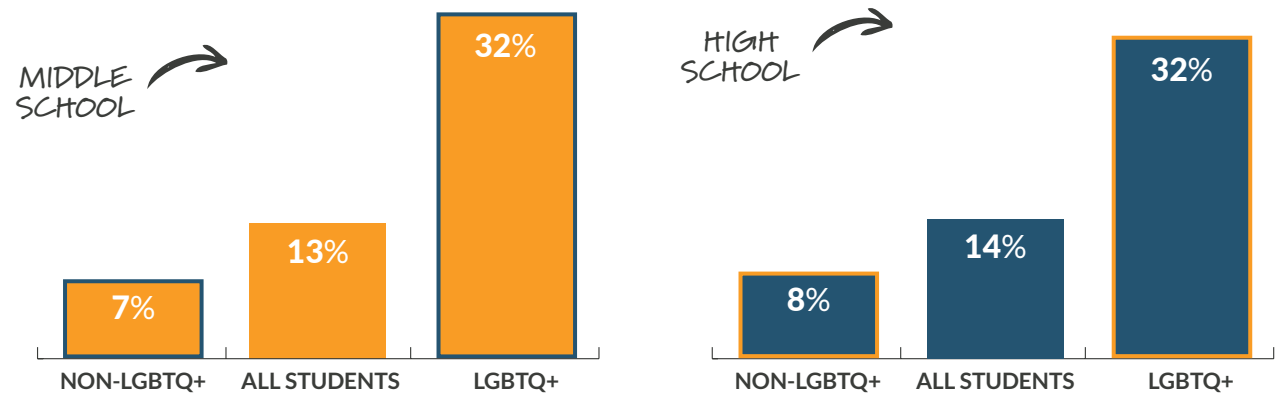
- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

Overall 13 percent of middle school students and 14 percent of high school students report that they have considered suicide in the last year.



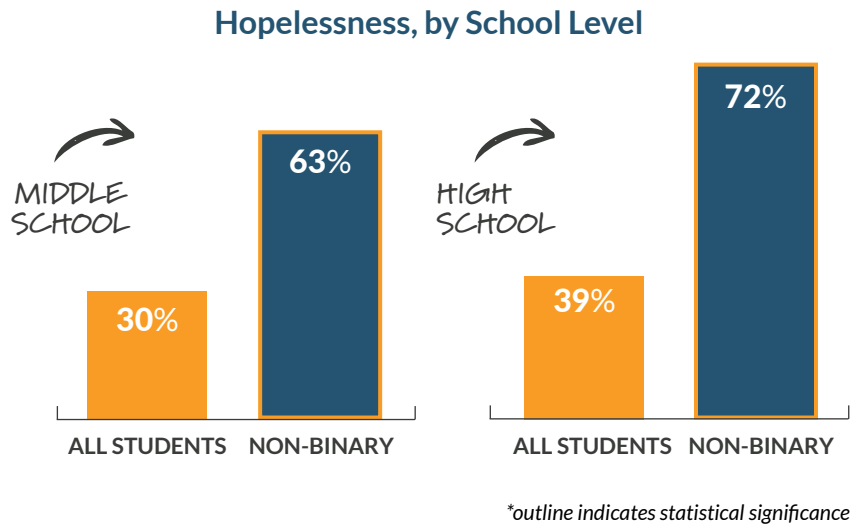
While there is no significant difference in reporting rates by grade level or by race, there are alarming differences by gender identity and LGBTQ+ status. A full 32 percent of LGBTQ+ middle school students report that they have considered suicide, four and half times higher that their non-LGBTQ+ peers (7 percent). And this pattern holds in high school where again 32 percent of LGBTQ+ students report that they have seriously considered suicide compared to their peers (8 percent).

Secondary LGBTQ+ Students Considering Suicide



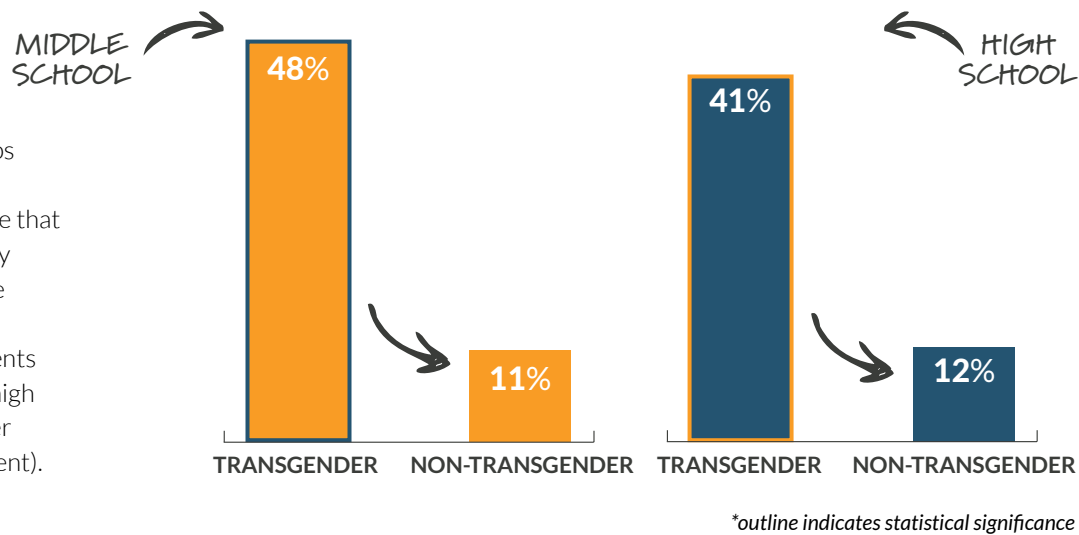
\*outline indicates statistical significance

An alarming percentage of non-binary middle schoolers report that they considered suicide in the previous year (41percent) - significantly higher than both their girl (14 percent) and boy classmates (8 percent). And, non-binary students report at a stunningly high percentage that they have felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more that they stopped doing some of their usual activities – significantly higher than their classmates.



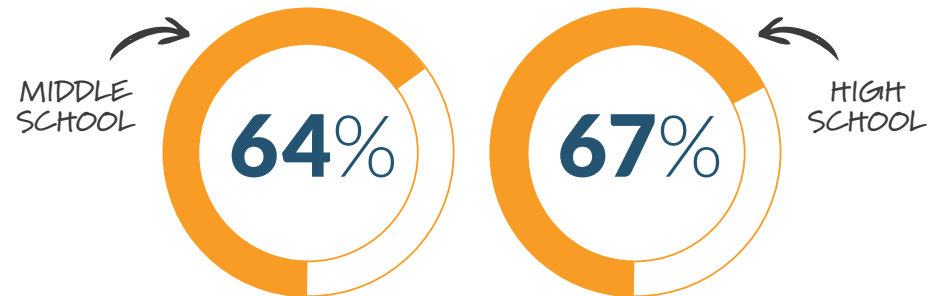
### Transgender Secondary Students Considering Suicide

The student groups who report at the highest percentage that they have seriously considered suicide are middle school transgender students (48 percent) and high school transgender students (41 percent).



### Hopelessness, Transgender Students

Like their non-binary peers, an astonishing preponderance of transgender youth report that they have felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more that they stopped doing some of their usual activities.



The insights presented in this report should provoke concern about what it means to come of age in America today, and action is urgently required. While the challenges of youth emotional and mental health seem daunting, we would be wise to recognize that — if listened to — students themselves can be our most valuable asset in making change.



“Take our advice seriously ... We’re young, but we deserve respect ... My guess is that the [school’s mental health] days are a result of us telling you we need a safe place, and you guys choosing to create a program by yourselves without working with us. That’s a huge issue. Don’t just HEAR us, LISTEN to us. ...You have to work alongside us, or it just doesn’t work. DO SOMETHING ... Do better.”

— 12th Grade, Identifies in another way, White

*A heartfelt thank you to each anonymous student voice represented here.*

## Sample Characteristics

The insights shared in this report are based on data collected from 222,837 students at 845 schools across 20 states. These schools all opted into the Emotional and Mental Health additional topic on the YouthTruth student surveys in the 2021-2022 school year.

- » Respondents came from 20 states (CA, CO, FL, GA, IL, IN, MA, MI, MN, MO, NJ, NY, OH, OR, PA, TN, TX, VA, VT, WA)
- » There were 222,837 respondents from 845 schools
  - 61,497 respondents/403 elementary schools
  - 63,626 respondents/220 middle schools
  - 97,714 respondents/222 high schools

	Elementary School (grades 3-5)	Middle School (grades 6-8)	High School (grades 9-12)	Total
Boy/man	39.02%	44.85%	43.77%	42.77%
Girl/woman	37.98%	37.78%	42.16%	39.76%
Non-binary or gender non-conforming	n/a	3.28%	3.49%	n/a

	Elementary School (grades 3-5)	Middle School (grades 6-8)	High School (grades 9-12)	Total
Hispanic or Latinx	11.42%	25.28%	29.13%	23.14%
White	20.91%	34.81%	39.77%	33.15%
Black or African American	5.73%	5.58%	5.06%	5.40%
American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous	2.64%	2.54%	1.42%	2.08%
Asian or Asian American	4.12%	6.49%	7.44%	6.25%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	.62%	.97%	1.05%	.91%
Other/self-described	5.06%	8.87%	2.99%	5.24%
Multiracial and/or multi-ethnic	7.20%	2.12%	3.48%	4.12%
Middle Eastern or North African	.48%	.79%	.89%	.75%

## Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses

The survey data were examined using descriptive statistics and a combination of independent chi-square tests and phi effect size. An alpha level of 0.05 was used to determine statistical significance, and effect sizes were examined for all analyses. Only analyses with at least a small effect size are reported.

Based on preliminary findings from the quantitative analyses, qualitative analytic questions were crafted to target an investigation into sub-samples of students' open-ended comments. Qualitative analytic software was then used to conduct lexical analyses and to auto-code students' responses. Related codes were clustered into concepts to identify robust themes to inform our analytic questions. Student quotations featured here were lightly edited for readability by adding punctuation and correcting spelling with the intent of sharing sentiments in students own words.

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